



# Accelerating Struggling Students' Learning Through Identity Redevelopment

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When students struggle in the elementary and middle grades, the likelihood that they will drop out of high school increases dramatically. Although most dropout prevention resources have focused on high schools in a last-ditch effort to keep students in school (Orfield, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2009), earlier interventions in elementary and middle grades provide a better opportunity to target assistance before students completely disengage (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Wells, 2000). As Robert Balfanz (2009) recently reported, students' experience in middle grades profoundly impacts the odds of graduating from high school; this is especially true for students living in poverty.

Although the middle grades can be difficult for any struggling student, it is especially so for a subset of very high-risk middle grades students—those who are one to three years over age for seventh grade. This article presents students' views about how an intervention program aimed at getting them back on track for on-time graduation helped them develop a more positive sense of their own ability to accomplish, belong, and engage in the classroom. The program was designed to accelerate learning so students completed two years of academic content in one year. While teaching the required seventh and eighth grade academic content in one year, the staff

and teachers also worked with students to reshape or redevelop their identity so that they saw themselves as capable, productive, contributing citizens.

The students' comments and perspectives are consistent with the essential attributes laid out in National Middle School Association's *This We Believe* document (2010). Specifically, their comments indicate that the acceleration program was *developmentally responsive* in that students participated actively in shaping the academic and social climate of the program; it was *challenging* in that students who previously had been unsuccessful in school were expected to complete two years' work in one year; it was *empowering* because students learned to control their behavior, organize their time, and seek help when needed; and it was *equitable* in that all students were expected to successfully complete the program. Their comments support the recommendations presented in the Balfanz (2009) report: they became increasingly aware of the influence of their own beliefs, behavior, and efforts on their academic and social accomplishments; they wanted to attend school because they enjoyed the program and felt like a part of a "family"; and their course performance improved through individual attention and engaging, relevant lessons.

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**This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics:** Meaningful Learning — Organizational Structures — Adult Advocate

This article has two primary purposes. First, it illustrates how acceleration strategies can reengage struggling students and help them see that success is possible. Second, it emphasizes the importance of helping struggling students reestablish their identity as learners and as contributing members of a classroom community. Struggling students often believe that they are incapable of accomplishing important tasks, that they are unworthy of membership in a classroom community, and that they cannot engage in challenging curriculum (Finn, 1989). The voices of middle grades students provide evidence of the value of acceleration strategies and insight into the process of identity redevelopment.

Building from this definition, acceleration programs are not restricted to a specific group, age range, or ability level. Acceleration starts from the individual needs of the learners, motivating and actively involving them through instruction that is interesting and engaging. In this way, acceleration programs allow learners to fulfill their potential and reach levels of achievement that may have seemed beyond them. The learning is faster, but it is also deeper. Students understand their learning preferences and develop lifelong skills in the process of learning—they learn how to learn (Silberman, 1996). Critical to the success of these programs is a safe and nurturing environment. This involves developing trusting and caring relationships between students and teachers and among

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## Acceleration and identity

### Acceleration

The term *acceleration* is used frequently in education, often to describe programs that move students faster through curriculum or deeper into more challenging content. It is most often associated with students identified as gifted and talented, but acceleration programs are increasingly serving struggling students. Finn and Swanson (2000) defined acceleration for all groups of students, making explicit the interplay between the quality of the curriculum and instruction; the actions and attitude of the learner; and the quality, actions, and attitude of the teacher.

Accelerated learning is learning that is of high intellectual quality; it is substantive, authentic, and relevant. Accelerated learning is continuous and connected; it is grounded in high standards. Accelerated learning occurs when students are active and responsible, involved in intellectual pursuits with other students, and turned on to learning. It happens when teachers are highly skilled and knowledgeable; they learn alongside their students and engage in meaningful discussion and dialogue with them. They are reflective in their practice and care about all students. (p. 11)

peers (Finnan, 2009; Lück & Parente, 2006). For students to be successful, they must attend the acceleration program regularly (Nicholson, 2006), and they must develop a sense that they are worthy of inclusion in the class and that each of them is a contributing member. In other words, an effective acceleration program models the characteristics outlined in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010).

### Identity development

School performance has a profound influence on students' development of a sense of themselves as successful learners and productive, contributing citizens. Too often, students who struggle in school get caught in a cycle of failure and despair that is fueled by a sense that they are unable to set and accomplish challenging goals; that they are unwanted and incapable of contributing to society; and that they do not have the intelligence or ability to engage in worthwhile, challenging tasks (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Finn, 1989). Without developing a positive sense of self, struggling students fall further and further behind.

When focusing specifically on struggling students, educators need to identify key aspects of identity that are affected by or contribute to poor school performance. Social scientists, particularly educational anthropologists, have long examined the interplay between identity,

culture, and school context (Hoffman, 1998; Ogbu, 1983; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1996; Spindler & Spindler, 1993). Much of this research focuses on the struggles of marginalized students (e.g., ethnic minority, high poverty, or gay and lesbian students) to develop and maintain multiple identities throughout the life cycle and within multiple contexts. Other research delves deeper into the distinction between self and identity to examine more enduring aspects of self that persist across contexts and time (Hoffman, 1998; Spindler & Spindler, 1993). The research presented in this paper examines this more enduring aspect of self through three core constructs of self: accomplishment, belonging, and engagement.

Students with a positive sense of accomplishment feel confident that they can successfully master challenging work (Bandura, 1977). They believe they possess the prior knowledge and skills needed to learn new things. They display the maturity to take personal responsibility for their learning and actions, and they persist on initially difficult tasks. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and can articulate their aspirations. They are comfortable joining their teachers and peers in recognizing and celebrating all students' learning and growth.

Students with a positive sense of belonging feel like they are contributing and welcome members of the group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). They accept people who have different characteristics (e.g., culture, economic status, gender, language) and seek opportunities to know others and establish caring, trusting relationships. Students engage in considerate discourse and interactions even when differences of opinion are expressed. They display behavioral self-control while working collaboratively and productively with one another.

Students with a positive sense of engagement enjoy the process of learning. They see themselves as capable of connecting classroom learning to the outside world and understanding concepts and relationships within and across subjects. They actively participate in dialogue, exchange diverse ideas, and carefully listen. They ask questions, engage in inquiry, and solve problems. They are engrossed in learning and seek opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills.

## **Description of the Accelerated Program**

The Accelerated Program was a school-university partnership established in 2006 as a middle grades

dropout prevention effort. The Accelerated Program provided an alternative learning environment for seventh grade students who were overage for their grade. The goal was for students to be promoted to ninth grade upon completion of the program. Eligible students were invited to apply, with the promise that they would complete seventh and eighth grades in one year. Students with serious behavior problems or learning or behavior disorders were eliminated from the pool. The Accelerated Program was located on the campus of a suburban middle grades school, occupying four portable classrooms situated adjacent to the main campus buildings. It was one of six middle grades acceleration programs sponsored by the district. All of the acceleration programs focused heavily on reading and math instruction in 90-minute blocks, used the Read 180 computer curriculum, maintained small class sizes, and compacted the seventh and eighth grade curriculum into one year. The Accelerated Program was considered the "Cadillac" of the acceleration programs because the school-university partnership provided additional resources (Courr  g  , 2007), including a full-time guidance counselor (district supported), a full-time science/social studies teacher (district supported), a full-time program director (university supported), enrichment activities (university supported), and ongoing research (university supported).

Students' academic experience in the Accelerated Program was quite different from the regular middle grades experience. They were taught in 90- rather than 40-minute course periods to focus more heavily on English language arts and math. Social studies and science were taught in one 90-minute block. Accelerated Program teachers taught all of the classes except for related arts, allowing for close collaboration and attention to individual student needs. The Accelerated Program was limited to 45 students, with a maximum class size of 15. Classroom instruction was augmented by enrichment opportunities, especially field trips and service-learning experiences that were unavailable to regular middle grades students.

A full-time counselor and program director provided social and emotional support exclusively to the Accelerated Program students. Located in the "front trailer" (a portable classroom dedicated to support services and group meetings), they designed systems to address behavioral and attitudinal issues. For example, they developed and maintained a system for students to



take “time-outs” from class; they initiated an intervention, Stop the Drama, when interpersonal issues arose among several of the girls; and they oversaw a yearlong theme, Ripple and Connect, to help students understand behavioral cause and effect. They also helped coordinate services provided by the university, organizations such as Communities in Schools, and tutors. In addition, they helped arrange for field trips and service-learning, and they planned regular Accelerated Program meetings designed to build community.

Over a two-year period the Accelerated Program served 66 students: 58% male, 42% female, 52% African American, 36% Caucasian, and 12% Hispanic. Nearly all students completed the program successfully. Of the first cohort, 33 of 37 students completed the year and were promoted to ninth grade; the four students not completing the program withdrew before the end of the year for various reasons. Of the second cohort, 33 students entered and 33 completed the program.<sup>1</sup> Attendance rates for both cohorts were very high, averaging only three absences for students, and behavior infractions were low—only one suspension in the first year and zero the second year. While these measures of success are important, it is equally important to hear from students, in their own words, whether and why they thought the Accelerated Program was effective.

## Research design

As part of the school-university partnership, the university provided ongoing research on the day-to-day activities and on student and staff attitudes and opinions. It is undeniable that, as part of the partnership, the university team hoped to report positive findings, but team members worked diligently to reduce bias. Team members carefully monitored interview questions for objectivity; visited the site frequently as participant observers over the two-year period; and talked informally to students, teachers, and staff members. The purpose of the research reported below is not an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Accelerated Program but a presentation of students’ views on how their sense of self changed through their year of involvement in the program. All of the students interviewed reported positive changes that could be attributed to the program. It is possible that they were reluctant to be critical of the program, but their interview comments were consistent with comments made during informal conversations.

Interviews took place during the school day in a quiet place away from other students and teachers. Using a set of open-ended interview prompts, students described their prior educational experience and their experience in the Accelerated Program. Interviews of the 2006–2007 student cohort occurred twice, in the late fall and in the spring. Students were selected for interviews to represent the gender and ethnic makeup of the student population. Fourteen students (seven male and seven female; seven African American, five white, and two Hispanic) participated in the interviews. Eleven students in the 2007–2008 cohort (six females and five males; six African American, five white) were interviewed using the same open-ended interview probes. These students were interviewed three times (fall, winter, and spring). Interviews were conducted as a team. One person asked questions, and the other recorded responses on the spot; interviews were also audio-recorded as backup. The interview team members also conducted observations and interacted informally with the students, so students were familiar with the researchers.

## Students’ sense of accomplishment

Students talked about how the Accelerated Program helped them accomplish what previously had been out of their reach. They appreciated the challenge of the accelerated



*The Accelerated Program provided one-on-one tutoring to help students master the rigorous, compacted curriculum.* photo by Ken Clutson

curriculum and the support provided by the teachers, director, and counselor. The Accelerated Program helped them gain more self-confidence and self-efficacy as they experienced success in the classroom. Students described many types of academic accomplishments, including improved grades and test scores, increased knowledge and skills, the ability to learn two years' material in one year in one year, and acquisition of better work habits and attitudes.

Students talked about learning more in the Accelerated Program year and doing better in school. For example, when asked to define "accomplishment," one student said, "Like if somebody asks you a question you don't know the answer to, then to answer the question, that's an accomplishment to me because I feel better on the inside." One student explained why she liked the Accelerated Program: "It's just, it really helps me understand stuff, and in the main building [traditional school] I didn't get much out of stuff. It was really hard for me to understand. ... And I'm understanding a lot of stuff, and I'm feeling older."

Other students equated academic accomplishment with being able to complete two years in one and to go on to high school a year earlier than they expected. One student described how students at her former middle school viewed Accelerated Program students:

They looked at us like we are retarded. Like, "she has to be, she failed twice." They thought we were crazy, but now they see that we are going to high school. I can't stop talking about it and neither can my mom.

The incentive of entering high school early worked; many students said that they worked harder because they wanted to pass and go on to high school.

Students attributed their increased accomplishment in the Accelerated Program largely to teacher actions and the nonacademic supports provided. The director and counselor developed behavioral and organizational systems that helped students focus on academic learning. They also provided other forms of guidance and advice and organized many enrichment activities such as field trips and service projects. Students greatly appreciated their efforts. One student said:

Well, you can talk to our guidance counselor. She's very helpful; she's very supportive, and she is very concerned and helpful. She just gives you confidence, boosts you up, and figures out the way to solve your problems and things like that.

The three classroom teachers worked with students until they understood material and provided easy

access to extra help. They demonstrated through their actions that they believed in the students. The following summarizes a widely held opinion:

At my old school, if we didn't learn something that was right you'd raise your hand and ask them to do it over, and they'll say no because you should have been listening. And now out here, they'll go over it one on one or with the whole class.

The Accelerated Program provided students an opportunity to build a sense of accomplishment through its philosophy, structure, and easy access to nonacademic supports. The philosophy is built on a desire to give students a second chance and an expectation that they are capable of accelerating their learning. Students enter as seventh graders but meet eighth grade standards by the end of the year, requiring teachers and students to believe that they are capable of such a demanding schedule. Students appreciated the opportunity to prove them right. A student said, "I think it's like getting a second chance at life, so you get to catch up with everybody."

According to students, the most important aspects of the program's structure were small class sizes and longer classes, which allowed more one-on-one time with the teachers. The structure helped with behavior, according to students, as they were better able to "pay attention, because there's not a lot of kids in the class so there's not a lot going on." Having fewer than 35 students a year facilitates individual attention and clear communication. The students also liked the 90-minute classes.

I like the times. If we had eight periods and had to go from class to class, it would be hard. This is getting us ready for next year. They have 90-minute classes in high school. You have more time to connect, talk.

## **Students' sense of belonging**

Students are more apt to learn in environments where they feel a sense of belonging or believe they are welcome and contributing members of the group. To the Accelerated Program students, belonging included learning in a family context, forming connections, and being expected to take responsibility for actions. Teacher actions and programmatic features supported this sense of belonging. Students frequently talked about how the Accelerated Program provided a sense of belonging that many had not experienced in their previous schools.

The Accelerated Program students characterized belonging as “family.” To them, family entailed being there for each other, knowing each other well, feeling safe to argue and disagree. For example, one student described the Accelerated Program as follows:

We still have our friends from our old schools and everything, but here, we’re not exactly like friends, we’re like family. So we argue with each other a lot most of the time, but because of the things that they taught us here, we handle our differences better, and so we aren’t as argumental as we would be if we were in the building [regular school].

The family environment entailed developing deep connections with each other and feeling a sense of responsibility to the group.

Accelerated Program students knew each other well and could count on each other. They developed a sense of trust and safety, and they learned to limit the drama that characterizes life for many middle grades students. One young adolescent vividly contrasted the Accelerated Program with her experience the previous year:

In my other classes, I could break down and cry, and no one would help. Here, I broke down, and several friends came to help. That meant a lot to hear that students care for each other. ... At [former school] I never talked to anyone. I was all bottled up. See my knuckles? I broke three of them hitting a metal post; I was so angry. Here I’ve learned that it’s better to talk it out. I am starting to understand. I’ve matured more this year. No one gave up on me; I thought they would, but they didn’t. It took two months for me to start to trust them.

Students recognized that to belong in the Accelerated Program required a level of personal responsibility, something they had not displayed previously. Students learned to take responsibility for themselves, to set goals for their future, and to help each other. One student described how the teachers helped her set goals:

We have meetings; everybody just talks to each other and different stuff. We use the Ripple and Connect stuff [thematic unit on cause and effect]. We’ll have a week that we try to accomplish one goal, like everyone will do something good for the next person, and by Friday we have a big meeting to be like, “Tell me one thing that you did good for a person this week.”

Other students talked about helping each other with family and home problems, relationships, and school

problems. They kept each other on track, learned to count on each other, earned each other’s trust, and avoided “he said, she said” drama.

The sense of belonging permeating the program grew from concerted efforts of the teachers, especially the director and counselor. Through clear structures, systems, and focused interventions, students could use processes to stay connected. Primarily through offering sound advice, encouraging dialogue, establishing clear procedures, and taking time to know students, the teachers demonstrated their care and interest in all students. As students described, the teachers “know our weaknesses and our advantages” and “give really good advice and help you learn it so you don’t make wrong choices.” Having people in the “front trailer” (i.e., director and counselor) allowed students to:

Talk to them about anything, because they won’t go off and tell other teachers what happened. It’s like a personal relationship, and you can talk to them about anything. They have action steps and things to make us do better, help us in our situation. And keep us going; without them I wouldn’t make it.

Another student said, “We can come to the first trailer, and they will stop what they are doing to help. It is fun and interesting. We do ‘unordinary’ stuff.”



*Teachers and counselors gave students in the Accelerated Program a high level of personal attention, fostering a sense of belonging.* photo by Mary Henton



## Students' sense of engagement

Engagement can be understood as being so involved in learning that it is pleasurable and rewarding. Not surprisingly, the Accelerated Program students appreciated learning in environments they considered fun. They liked variation, the opportunity to move around, and to learn through field trips and games. They also realized that to be engaged in learning, they had to stay focused and attend to their learning and behavior.

Variation was at the core of the reading program selected by the district. Read 180 involves a rotating set of techniques, including a computer-based program, small-group instruction with the teacher, and independent

To encourage active engagement in learning, the Accelerated Program staff targeted student attitudes and behaviors that stood in the way of learning. The students described how they became more mature and developed leadership skills. They got in trouble less frequently, were more calm and happy with themselves, and took responsibility for doing their work. Some discussed the importance of teacher expectations and program supports (e.g., Ripple Connect, goal setting); other students described developing leadership skills to help them in high school. A young woman said, "This has taught me leadership skills, life skills. It has made me proud and more confident. I know lots of people. I know how to trust."

**The active learning through field trips and games helped students make sense of what they learned; they saw connections they otherwise might have missed.**

reading. Students liked the rotation because "I get to read, have free time, get on the computer, and be interactive. I like that instead of sitting there and listening to the teacher and taking down notes." Another student characterized his classes as follows:

The teachers never do things boring. We can focus more, and there's always a game to a subject, where we're having a good time and learning at the same time. It's not like the class is quiet and boring, and we've always got the books out. We're always doing hands-on stuff like that, so that's very nice.

As the following description illustrates, students remembered their lessons because they were actively involved in them:

I'm not a textbook learner. ... I have to learn in action. [Science teacher] made funny songs. We learned about rocks, volcanoes. We had a model of the water cycle. He put in different colored things like spices. When the water got through the cycle it was a disgusting color. It opened my eyes. He changed lives. I would go on any trip he arranges. He said that we were his favorites. He is crazy, but we jumped on it.

The active learning through field trips and games also helped students make sense of what they learned; they saw connections they otherwise might have missed.

Many Accelerated Program students had histories of struggling to keep their behavior in control, but they became proud of their newly developed skills and attitudes. A student described his changed behavior:

My behavior has changed a lot this year. I'm much more mature. I come in and talk to people; I talk to teachers about what's going on at home. I don't laugh at somebody making mistakes or other people's problems. I'm paying attention in class, doing my homework; that's a big change from last year.

Students described themselves as calm and confident. One young woman said that she would tell incoming students that "you'll change a lot, and you'll be happy with who you are, the person you've become when you leave here."

Students were quick to attribute their increased engagement to the teachers and program features.

They [teachers] talk to us individually to see how things are going. They do this daily. They boost our confidence. Without them it wouldn't be the same. People would have been out of control. They keep us in check. I've seen a difference in the behavior.

Students were better able to engage in learning through strategies that helped them see cause-and-effect relationships, behave appropriately, and organize their

time and work. One student said, “At the beginning of the year there was an idea called Ripple and Connect, and I still use it. I think about cause and effect before I take an action. I think about how it affects other people.”

## Conclusions

After one year, these students were in the process of redefining themselves. They had entered the Accelerated Program with serious doubts about their worth and ability. Many of them had described themselves as failures without much of a future. Some had had trouble making and keeping friends and difficulty fitting into social settings. They had been disengaged and disinterested in learning. In one year, the Accelerated Program made great strides in changing these beliefs. With considerable attention to their academic and social strengths and weaknesses, students began to see themselves as capable learners and as contributing members of the “family.” By establishing a close community in which students took responsibility for themselves and their peers, they regained a sense of belonging. Through interactive lessons that drew connections to the outside world and to larger concepts and by learning strategies to stay focused on learning, students realized that school could be engaging, interesting, and fun.

Within the context of the Accelerated Program, the students began to shift their sense of self to make room for future success in school and in life. As they moved out of the Accelerated Program and into the social setting of traditional high schools, this fragile identity shift was tested. Informal efforts to stay in touch with the first cohort provided some support for these high school students. Several reunions were held, and most of the students attended. These students also provided some peer mentoring for the second cohort. Of the first cohort of students, 42% stayed on track and were in the eleventh grade in 2008–2009. An additional 42% were in tenth grade. The remaining students struggled and were still classified as ninth graders by the end of the 2008–2009 academic year. In terms of behavior, 79% of the first cohort had no out-of-school suspensions in high school; 65% had no in-school suspensions. Two of these students were expelled but returned in 2009–2010.

The Accelerated Program ended in 2008 because of budget cuts and administrative changes, so the second cohort of students was the last to participate in the program. This group received more formal follow-up

attention through the university partner. The former Accelerated Program director provided one-on-one and small-group support at four of the high schools serving former Accelerated Program students. Like the first cohort, this group has had mixed success in high school. Fifty-two percent of the second cohort students were on track (in the tenth grade) during the 2008–2009 academic year; 48% were in the ninth grade. In terms of behavioral issues, 57% had no out-of-school suspensions, and 64% had no in-school suspensions. Although the data do not point to a dramatic transformation, the Accelerated Program provided a necessary intervention for many of the students. Graduates of the program continue to look back to it as a golden time. One boy from the second cohort said, “I just want to rewind to AP and keep doing it over and over.” Although this boy is doing well in tenth grade, he looks back on his year in the Accelerated Program as the best year of his life.

Several issues must be considered before attempting to replicate the Accelerated Program. First, intensive interventions such as this are expensive but worthwhile if they put students back on track for high school graduation. Unfortunately, the district experienced severe budget shortages and could not continue to adequately support the program, especially the counseling support that was so crucial to the Accelerated Program’s success. Second, although students made considerable progress and reported universal support for the program, its effectiveness was diminished once students entered high school and no longer had access to the Accelerated Program supports. One year is not long enough to permanently undo negative habits and overcome negative influences. Once students are in high school, sustained and systemic supports are needed to keep their fragile sense of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement intact. Third, the social and emotional supports were critical to students’ transformation. Although the intensive, focused curriculum helped students get back on track, these gains would have been fleeting without the social and emotional support provided by the director and counselor and without a focus on identity redevelopment.

The essential attributes of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) were recurring themes in the interviews with students. By helping students develop a more positive sense of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement, the Accelerated Program provided an excellent example of a program that is developmentally responsive,



challenging, empowering, and equitable. It helped these struggling students stay on the path to graduation by making them want to attend school; by redirecting their beliefs, behavior, and attitudes to support school success; and by providing instruction that engaged and challenged students while offering necessary support to address individual learning needs.

## Author Notes

<sup>1</sup>Three students entered the program midyear, two students withdrew, and one student moved. A total of 36 students enrolled at some point in the program.

### Extensions

Why is it important to consider students' self-concept when addressing learning issues?

This case illustrates that one year may not be long enough to undo negative habits and overcome negative influences. Discuss some ways that support for students could have continued into their high school years, even on a limited budget.

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